

3RD BATTALION, 383RD REGIMENT INITIATES "VISIT A VET" VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

The 3rd Battalion, 383rd Regiment, located at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri has recently started a new and exciting volunteer program. Members of the battalion were looking for creative and worthwhile causes to positively impact the local community while improving unit cohesion. This led to the creation of the "Visit a Vet" Volunteer Program. This program allows military service members within the organization a chance to honor those who have previously served our nation in the Armed Services. Currently, most of the unit's full time staff participates in the program as work schedules allow.

Jefferson Barracks, a historic military compound in St. Louis, Missouri, is situated near a regional Veterans Administration (VA) Medical Center. The hospital grounds are a campus-type, multi-building complex situated on 143 acres overlooking the Mississippi River. The facility houses and treats hundreds of U.S. military veterans in several different specialty areas, ranging from geriatric care and spinal cord injury treatment to a rehabilitation domicile program for homeless vets. Because of the proximity to Jefferson Barracks as well as the ties to the military, the "Visit a Vet" Volunteer Program seemed like a perfect fit from the beginning. Lieutenant Colonel Gerard Rideaux, the Battalion Commander, and Major (P) Anthony Hofmann, the Battalion Executive Officer have taken the lead by doing the initial coordination in establishing this outstanding program. It remains strictly a voluntary program for members of the 3d Battalion, with participation steadily increasing.

The Veterans Facility has a staff of three full-time members in their Volunteer Services Department. The coordinator of this department is Marcena Gunter. She is assisted by Eunice Petford and Betty Jones. These friendly and capable staff members made the unit's orientation pleasant and have greatly enhanced the volunteer experience by personally escorting unit members during the initial visit. 3d Battalion volunteers have a goal of visiting the VA facility once per month, visiting as a group and staying about 2 or 3 hours per visit. In general, every visit consists of volunteers visiting and talking to veterans, often listening to the amazing stories these great Americans have to tell.

As of this writing the 3d Battalion's soldiers have made two visits to the VA Facility. In order to establish a consistent schedule for visits, the unit has designated visits to commence on the second Thursday of each month. Each visit focuses on a different section or ward of the hospital. Thus far volunteers have visited a spinal cord injury ward and a hospice ward. Although there are numerous civilian volunteers and organizations that spend many hours of their time visiting these honorable men and women, the 3d Battalion is currently the only military organization doing so at the Saint Louis Veterans Administration Medical Center location.

Regardless of which hospital area the unit has visited, the facility's residents truly enjoy seeing soldiers in uniform. Volunteers have met and spoken with veterans of all branches of service who have served every major conflict from World War II to Operation Iraqi Freedom. One constant is the obvious camaraderie and instant bond these men and women have with 3d Battalion soldiers as fellow service members. The stories the veterans tell are sometimes serious and sad, but just as likely to be humorous and fun-filled. The one constant is the genuine appreciation one sees in the faces of these men and women simply for spending some quality time with them, which is the main purpose of the "Visit A Vet" Volunteer Program.

Although the program is in its infancy, it is already reaping benefits for all involved. The hospital benefits from additional volunteers, the veterans benefit from visiting with uniformed personnel, and the 3d Battalion soldiers benefit by having the opportunity to meet these fine American military veterans. As the program continues to evolve, the 3d Battalion hopes it becomes a unit tradition for years to come. Giving something back to the community is important; honoring these fine military veterans is a privilege we all cherish.



Pictured from Left to Right
 Betty Jones, MAJ (P) Anthony Hofmann, volunteer, Marcena Gunter, SFC Tony McDonald,
 Eunice Petford, LTC Gerard Rideaux, MSG Todd Burke



Pictured from Left to Right
 SFC (P) Anthony Scott, MSG Todd Burke, WWII USAF Veteran, LTC Gerard Rideaux.